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Jackie Wiggins

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TEACHER CONTROL AND CREATIVITY

Carefully designed compositional experiences can foster students' creative processes and augment teachers' assessment efforts.

BY JACKIE WIGGINS

With the advent of the National Standards for Music Education,¹ more and more teachers have begun to understand the importance of bringing compositional experiences into their classrooms. Since for many the process involves new and unfamiliar challenges, many teachers wrestle with the particulars of carrying out such a project. Some are unsure of how to design compositional experiences in ways that will enable students to carry them out. Others are unsure of how to work with students' products once they have been created. Some answers to these questions can be found in a variety of publications, including the support materials for the National Standards.² However, not much has been written to help teachers deal with some of the biggest questions they encounter—What is the role of the teacher in the creative process? What are some of the things teachers can do that enable students to be successful? What decisions and actions might actually make it more difficult for students to succeed?

Jackie Wiggins is associate professor and coordinator of music education in the Department of Music, Theatre, and Dance at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan.

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From several sources—my own experiences working with student composition in classrooms for more than twenty-five years, the classroom experience of colleagues who have composed with their students, and my own research and that of fellow researchers in classroom composition—I have learned a great deal about designing effective compositional experiences and about the nature of the teacher's role in the process. It is possible for teachers to design and carry out compositional projects in ways that enable students to initiate

and develop musical ideas. Unfortunately, it is also possible for teachers to inadvertently design or carry out projects in ways that might actually hamper their students' ability to initiate and develop musical ideas.

As a profession, we have a long history of "teacher control." The traditional vision of school music making consists of the teacher standing in front of the room conducting or directing students who are carrying out the teacher's instructions. For many years, our image of a good music teacher was one who could get students to make music the way he or she wanted them to with the smallest number of verbal instructions. Although interactive learning has begun to make its way into music classrooms—with opportunities for students to interact with music on their own—we have few professional models to help us understand the teacher's role in this new instructional setting.

In addition, in our profession we have a long history of assuming that students bring little or no musical knowledge into the classroom. We have operated on the assumption that it is the teacher who is the expert and that the students have little or nothing to bring to the situation. In actuality, students bring to our classrooms an enormous amount of musical knowledge of our culture gleaned from liv-

ing within that culture. They easily function within melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, and formal structures typical of our culture. Creative experiences enable students to articulate and share what they know and understand about music without the added complication of having to know the vocabulary to describe and label what they know. Well-designed creative experiences enable students to communicate what they understand about music—and allow us to assess their level of understanding of the music of their world and of the concepts we have been teaching in class.

As our vision of music education changes, we must be certain that our vision of the teacher's role changes along with it. Because of our long tradition of teacher control and our assumptions that students do not really know very much about music, teachers sometimes construct creative assignments in ways that not only fail to promote creative thought but may actually hamper it.

Enabling versus Hampering

We need to better understand what constitutes an assignment that enables students' creativity and what constitutes an assignment that restricts or even prevents it. Much work has been done in the language arts field to teach teachers how to "get out of their students' way" and to allow them to express what they really know and understand about their world. We need to look at what language arts experts have learned and take it to heart. Here is a vignette from an actual language arts classroom:

Fifth graders in an inner-city classroom were given the following language arts assignment: "Write three paragraphs about tornadoes. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence. The first paragraph should tell what you know about tornadoes. The second should tell what a tornado is like. The third should tell what to do if a tornado comes."

One student wrote: "When a tornado happens, the sky gets very dark and there is no noise."

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Another wrote, "A tornado is swirling air rising from the ground."

Both students were having trouble moving from their opening statements into the particulars of the assignment. Upon seeking the teacher's assistance, both were given instructions about how to make their opening sentences conform to the parameters of the assignment. As a result, neither produced a particularly memorable product.

What might these students have produced had they been allowed and encouraged to continue with their striking words? What might the teacher have done to nurture this? What the students are thinking and trying to communicate is what is really important, not the parameters of the assignment. The teacher needed to ask questions about what the students know, think, or feel about a tornado. To the student who said, "The sky gets very dark," the teacher might have asked, "What color was the sky? Was it black? Was the sky completely dark? Was it just parts of the sky? What else do you know about tornadoes? What else could you tell me if I didn't know anything about a tornado?" In order to answer

questions such as these, the students would need to think carefully and deeply about what they already know and what they want to communicate to someone else. They would think about how the subject matter might best be expressed and not about the requirements of the assignment.

In this case, the structure of this assignment and the nature of the teacher's actions when the students sought help actually limited their creativity.

We can find parallels to this scenario in some kinds of music composition assignments. Music teachers who ask students to compose a piece that is twenty notes long should remember what it was like to write a hundred-word essay and spend more time counting words than thinking about its content. Music teachers who ask students to compose music using a particular rhythm pattern should remember the restrictions of having to use a particular vocabulary word in a sentence. Composing a piece using only *sol*, *mi*, and *la* is as limited in its own way as making up a story that uses ten spelling words. While these kinds of writing assignments may present certain challenges, they are not creative challenges and are unlikely to result in fine literary works. Students focus on the "game-like" parameters of the assignment instead of the quality of the product or what it will express. In the same way, compositional assignments with restrictive parameters can cause students to focus on the extramusical, nonexpressive aspects of a project, and this can hamper rather than enable or promote the creative process.

This is not to say that teachers intentionally restrict their students. However, because of some of the instructional decisions they make, some teachers do inadvertently limit their students' potential creativity.

Restricting Options

Some teachers design restrictive assignments in an effort to make the project easier for their students. By this effort, they actually assert control over the situation that may ultimately

restrict their students' creativity. An example is asking students to work from a particular rhythm or tonal pattern. Some music educators approach song composition by asking students to write a short poem and then decide which words in the poem should be quarter or eighth notes. I have watched students work on such assignments by arbitrarily distributing quarter and eighth notes over the page (making visual decisions rather than aural ones). The teacher's next instruction, which often involves tone bells or xylophone bars, asks students to assign a given pitch to each note they have written (usually from a pentatonic scale and often not even all five pitches). Some children approach this task by randomly assigning pitches to the notes written on their page of poetry. I have never seen children who have worked this way able to sing the songs they have written. While they may be able to play them with reasonable accuracy, they are more rhythm exercises than songs. This is not creating; it is puzzle solving.

Students given a genuine opportunity to compose a song can sing it accurately, with all the nuances and meaning they intend it to express. Because they have created it, they truly possess the song and do not forget it. But students who make up a song by fitting together puzzle pieces need the teacher's help to sing it, because they do not "own" or even know the song. Students who genuinely compose a song know it intimately. A better assignment might be to ask students to make up a song that expresses something they want to express. They may choose to start with lyrics or with decisions about the overall style, texture, or form. Even kindergarten students can use what they come into the classroom knowing about songs to compose original songs. The very youngest children will need more assistance, of course, but the teacher should provide help only when it is needed and stay out of the way when it is not.

Focusing on Detail or Whole

One of the intrinsic problems with asking students to focus on specific rhythms or pitches when they com-

pose is that, left to their own devices, their primary decisions in composing tend to be the broader, more holistic decisions. From what I have observed, students' initial decisions seem to reflect general concepts, like style ("Let's make it a rock song") or form ("You be the verse and we'll be the chorus"), textural organization ("Me and Steve are gonna be the tune and you guys be the background"), or affective characteristics ("Let's make it real scary!"). Students may develop thematic material at the outset and use a particular motif with a particular rhythmic and pitch structure that they have chosen themselves as the basis for a work, but I have never observed them beginning with an isolated rhythm pattern or series of pitches unless instructed to do so by a teacher. In other words, the creative process seems to be holistic. Therefore, it appears that an assignment that stems from or asks students to focus on isolated patterns would go against the nature of the creative process.³



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Requiring Notated Versions

Here is a vignette drawn from an actual music classroom:

A middle school teacher asked her students to pair off and compose pieces as the culminating project of a keyboard class. The students were to write

their pieces down on manuscript paper. Writing notated music on paper was a new experience for these students, something they had studied for the first time during this particular semester. As I sat in the back of the room, the students around me began work on the assignment. Most of them began by playing their keyboards. Many students immediately found melodies or chord sequences they liked. They worked for quite a while, playing various permutations of their thematic materials, as I have observed other students do in numerous classrooms. However, team by team, the same comments were made. "We can't do that! We don't know how to write that down!" So, one team after another, they stopped creating and either drew random collections of notes on their papers and tried to figure out how to play what they had just written, or they attempted to play something that they knew they would know how to write. By the time the project was over, each team had produced some notes on paper and could play what it had written, although haltingly and, more often than not, inaccurately. Their pieces contained only quarter and eighth notes. Most were unaccompanied, angular melodies—a far cry from the syncopated rhythms and interesting chord progressions they had played before they remembered they had to notate their work.

Requirements to "write your piece down" can limit creativity even when nonstandard notation is accepted and encouraged. In a fourth-grade classroom where the children worked in small groups to compose pieces for xylophone and percussion, the teacher asked them to write down the letter names of the pitches in the melodies they composed. In the group I was studying, a group of four girls, the children behaved much as the middle school keyboard students did. Each group member immediately thought of a motif for the work. For about five

minutes, each student practiced and subtly altered her own motif, looking for the preferred version. When they began sharing their ideas and trying to put them together, one student remembered that they needed to write their melody down in letter names. Immediately, the interesting, syncopated ideas were lost, and the students began the slow, painstaking process of playing one pitch at a time and writing it down. One girl tried again and again to play her original idea slowly enough to write it down, but she was unable to and eventually abandoned the melody. The problem was that the group members had not conceived of their melodies by letter name—and letter names had nothing to do with the creative process; the students had been engaged in thinking in sound.

When students really compose music using their own musical ideas and not teacher gimmicks, they seem to remember their music months and even years later. I have many instances in my research—and even more evidence from my teaching—that students write ideas down to please the teacher and not because they need to. They remember their own musical ideas because they are meaningful to them.

In both cases, the classroom teachers were unaware of the earlier versions of the students' original melodies. They heard only the students' performances of their finished products and therefore assumed that the assignments were successful. I knew of the students' earlier work in both cases because I was observing and recording the children's work as they composed. Until I recorded and studied students in my own classroom, I too had not realized how many wonderful ideas they were throwing away because they did not fit into the assignment's parameters. It was a hard lesson for me to learn.

Designing Enabling Parameters

Teacher control can rear its head when too much emphasis is placed on the parameters of an assignment. I do not mean to imply that the teacher should establish no parameters. That would be completely disabling in most cases. "Just make up anything you

Examples of Enabling Parameters

Formal Structure

- Create a piece in ABA form.
- Create a variation on this theme. (Students will then incorporate the variations into a whole class "theme and variations.")
- Create a song that has a verse and a refrain.

Metric Design

- Create a piece that has a section that moves in twos followed by a section that moves in threes.
- Create a drum part that moves in fives (two and three or three and two).
- Create a melody to fit with the drum part you have invented.

Textural Structure

- Create a piece that has melody and an accompaniment (children may call it a "tune" and a "background").
- Create your own round (canon).

Harmonic Structure

- Create a series of chords on a keyboard, guitar, or Autoharp. Sing a melody that fits with the chords. (Students can do this by ear when singing.)

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want" would be a terrifying assignment for most people (not just students). Where would one begin? I have found that it is better to choose just one parameter—a broad overarching idea like a particular form or textural structure or metric design—and allow students to make their own decisions about the remaining structural

elements. (See the Enabling Parameters sidebar for examples of assignments related to formal, textural, and harmonic structures and metrical design.) However, once the parameters of the assignment are in place and understood by all, it is best not to dwell on them. Allow the students' creative excitement to take over. If a group that is supposed to compose an ABA piece composes an ABAB piece by mistake (or design), celebrate the finished product for its own value. This is not the time to chastise. One might mention the deviation from the original instructions in passing, but the focus should be on celebrating the students' ideas and the ways in which they have decided to carry them out. Ultimately, the goal is for the students to be able and willing to use music for personal expression, not just to show what they know. Be sure to keep the focus on what music making is all about and be careful not to get lost in the particulars.

When designing an assignment, consider whether it truly reflects what

Figure 1. Piece in ABA form composed by five fifth graders

1

Sop, Alt, Bass Xyls

Alto Metallophone

Conga

Finger Cymbal & Chinese Gong

4

Xylophone

Alto Metallophone

Conga

Cymbal & Gong

8

Xylophone

Alto Metallophone

Conga

Cymbal & Gong

12

Xylophone

Alto Metallophone

Conga

Cymbal & Gong

16

Xylophone

Alto Metallophone

Conga

Cymbal & Gong

20

Xylophone

Alto Metallophone

Conga

Cymbal & Gong

you would like the students to focus on. Make sure it does not contain elements that detract from that focus. For example, if you want the students to focus on using a variety of tone colors or dynamics, do not ask them to write down their melodies. The students will fixate on writing down melodies (and will, of course, play melodies they can easily write down) and will forget all about using a variety of tone colors or dynamics. It is not uncommon for pieces designed to show varieties of tone color or dynamic contrast to have no melodies at all, but to be contemporary-sounding conglomerations of sound. Beware of assignments that pull students in more than one direction at the same time. They will end up focusing on one idea and forgetting or abandoning the others.

Nature of Teacher Comments

It is also wise to consider carefully the terminology and expressions you use when explaining compositional assignments. When teachers use expressions like, "I want you to do _____ with your piece," students can be overheard saying, "He doesn't want it like that. He wants us to do _____." They are more concerned about what will please the teacher than what will serve their own purposes. Teachers also need to think about how they respond when students make their work public by sharing their finished products or works in progress. A colleague from Australia who has studied compositional activities in Australian and British classrooms quite extensively found many examples in which teachers encouraged students to alter their work.⁴ Some teachers whom she observed actually recomposed students' work, clearly indicating to the students that what they had done was wrong.

The teacher's response to students' work is critical. Students need to feel that their ideas are valid and important in order for the present experience to enable future work. Criticizing and altering students' work can give students the impression that they are composing music for the teacher and not for themselves. They tend to lose ownership of the work, which is a crit-

ical part of engaging in the compositional process in the first place.

If sharing times should not be times for criticism, then how does one turn the sharing experience into a productive teaching situation? If teachers listen carefully to the music their students produce, they can use the creative products as assessment tools. Instead of "correcting" the students, teachers can use what they have heard to design future units of study that will further students' understanding. In this way, analyzing students' creative products can drive curricular planning by enabling the teacher to know which things the students understand and which need more work. For example, if students' pieces lack textural variety, the teacher might plan a unit dealing with textural possibilities. If the students seem to be having trouble with simultaneity (a common problem for beginners), then the teacher might design some in-class performance experiences focusing on how parts fit together and what it means to play one part in time with another. If their melodies are simplistic, students could study the different ways composers construct melodies. If the pieces lack dynamic contrast, the students could study works that are driven by dynamics. The teacher might include the students in the planning process by saying, "These pieces are wonderful. Everyone did the assignment very well. You all made pieces that used some long sounds and some short sounds, and there were some wonderful ideas there. Now, did you notice that as all of you played your pieces, all the music seemed to be at the same volume level? Do you think it might have made a difference if some parts of your piece were louder or softer than others? Next week, we are going to look at how some professional composers use loud and soft sections to spice up their pieces. Then maybe we will try to make some of our own pieces that have changes in volume."

Nurturing Independence

Learning to teach music in ways that invite and validate students' musical ideas is not as difficult as it may seem, but it does require a shift in per-

spective. Teachers need to recognize that students enter classrooms chock full of musical ideas. They need to plan instructional strategies that will enable students to share what they already know about music and enable the teacher to identify the things students do not know. Analytical listening lessons can provide clues to which ideas students know and which they need to learn. Students' ongoing evaluation of their own performances can provide clues, as well. However, the best tool for finding out whether or not students understand a particular musical concept is a creative assignment. Students who understand a musical idea can easily operate with it and use it to generate an original piece. (See figure 1 for an example of a composition created by five fifth graders:)

Composing is thinking in sound. In order to compose, students need to be able to think musically. Asking them to focus on nonmusical parameters will not help them to think musically. Students can use what they know about the music—what they have learned in the classroom and what they have learned living in the world—to create original musical works if we will only get out of their way and let them do it. If students are really allowed to use what they know to create music, their products will be genuine indicators of the level and nature of their musical understanding. Teachers can then assess that understanding and can use their assessments to determine what to teach next, as they nurture their students' musical independence.⁵ Working this way can foster a vision of curricular planning that is genuinely based on what the students need to know and will surely move the students further along on the path toward musical independence.

Students need opportunities to make music on their own—without unnecessary teacher controls. If we offer our students such opportunities, we will see them soar in ways none may have thought possible.

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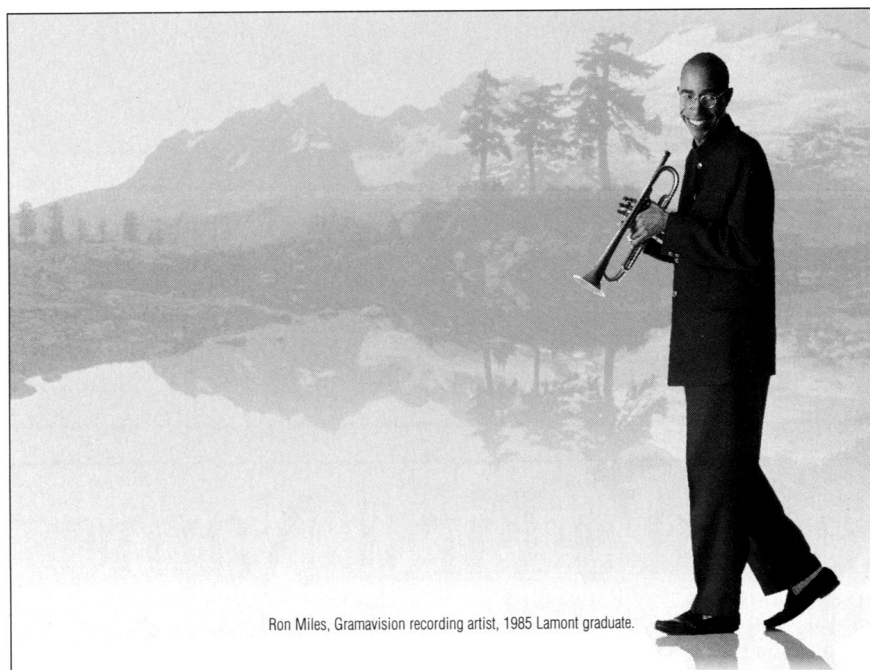
1. Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, *National Standards for Arts Education: What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able to Do in the Arts* (MENC: Reston, VA, 1994).

2. *Performance Standards for Music: Strategies and Benchmarks for Assessing Progress toward the National Standards, Grades PreK-12* (MENC: Reston, VA, 1996). See also *The School Music Program: A New Vision* (MENC: Reston, VA, 1994); *Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction: Grades PreK-12* (MENC: Reston, VA, 1994); *Aiming for Excellence: The Impact of the Standards Movement on Music Education* (MENC: Reston, VA, 1996); and the *Strategies for Teaching* series (MENC: Reston, VA 1995-99).

3. See Jackie H. Wiggins, "Building Structural Understanding: Sam's Story," *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 6, no. 3 (1995): 57-75; Jackie H. Wiggins, "Children's Strategies for Solving Compositional Problems with Peers," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 42, no. 3 (1994): 232-52; Jackie H. Wiggins, "The Nature of Children's Musical Learning in the Context of a Music Classroom," Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1992; and Jackie H. Wiggins, "Recurring Themes: Same Compositional Strategies—Different Settings," paper presented at Southeastern Music Education Symposium, May 1998, Athens, GA.

4. Noela Hogg of Deakin University in Melbourne shared these findings at the Key Focus Session on Creativity at the MENC National In-Service Conference, April 1996, in Kansas City, Missouri. See also Noela Hogg, "Strategies to Facilitate Student Composing," *Research Studies in Music Education* 2, no. 2 (June 1994): 15-24.

5. "Nurturing musical independence" is a phrase obtained from Eunice Boardman in personal communication, September 1990. ■



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